

INDIANA COURT OF APPEALS REAFFIRMS HOLISTIC APPROACH TO GRAVE DISABILITY DETERMINATIONS

The Indiana Court of Appeals (the "Court") recently affirmed a trial court's finding of grave disability, reiterating two settled principles: (1) no single fact can establish grave disability; and (2) courts must evaluate the totality of the circumstances. The Court also confirmed that past conduct with a nexus to the patient's current condition may have evidentiary value. *In re: Civil Commitment of K.M.*, 270 N.E.3d 506 (Ind. Ct. App. 2025).

BACKGROUND

K.M., who has a documented history of mental illness, voluntarily admitted herself to a hospital after her mother grew concerned about her increasingly erratic behavior. In the months before admission, K.M. painted her apartment entirely black, removed electrical outlets from the walls, burned herself in the process, reported hearing voices, told her mother she wanted to drink bleach water and had all of her teeth removed. After admission, the hospital petitioned for temporary commitment.

At the commitment hearing, K.M.'s treating psychiatrist testified K.M. suffered from a substantial impairment of judgment, preventing her from functioning independently. The psychiatrist described delusional thinking, including Capgras delusion—the belief that family members have been replaced by imposters—and noted K.M.'s limited insight into her condition. Although K.M. initially agreed to take medication, she later refused. The trial court found K.M. gravely disabled and granted the petition. K.M. appealed.

On appeal, K.M. advanced three arguments: (1) the trial court relied on insufficient evidence by focusing on past conduct rather than her condition at the time of the hearing; (2) the trial court improperly relied on her refusal to take medication, which cannot alone justify commitment; and (3) the removal of her teeth was merely a personal medical decision.

The Court rejected each argument. It explained that evidence of past behavior may establish a clear nexus between pre-admission conduct and the patient's condition at the time of the commitment hearing.

ANALYSIS OF GRAVE DISABILITY

Indiana law defines "gravely disabled" as a condition in which, because of mental illness, an individual is in danger of harm because the individual is either unable to provide for basic needs or has suffered a substantial impairment or obvious deterioration in the ability to function independently. [IC § 12-7-2-96](#). The trial court found K.M. met the second criterion.

Although the Court agreed that medication refusal cannot, by itself, establish grave disability, it concluded the trial court did not rely on that factor alone. The record contained substantial additional evidence of impaired judgment and deteriorating functioning.

Finally, the Court addressed K.M.'s argument that removing her teeth was simply a personal medical choice. The Court emphasized, "it is not the choice itself but the process" by which K.M. reached that decision—a process driven by her delusional belief that others had replaced her healthy teeth with rotten ones. Considered alongside the other evidence, that decision-making process reflected impaired judgment and an inability to make rational choices about her own care, consistent with grave disability.

The Court, therefore, affirmed the temporary commitment order.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- **Past conduct can establish the required nexus:** Evidence of behaviors preceding admission may explain the basis for a patient's current hospitalization and support a finding of grave disability.
- **Medication refusal is relevant—but not dispositive:** A patient's refusal to take medication may be considered, but it cannot be the sole basis for a commitment order.
- **Activities of daily living are not determinative:** Even if a patient can manage daily tasks, courts may still find grave disability based on other evidence of impaired judgment or deteriorating functioning.

If you have questions or would like more information about this topic, please contact:

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